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# The Partner as Source of Social Support in Problem and Non-Problem Situations

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*A Rasch-type loneliness scale was administered in two separate studies. The first involved a sample of 708 unemployed, occupationally disabled and employed men and women. The second involved a sample of 412 married, unmarried, divorced and widowed women and men. The effects of being with or without a partner, the respondents' evaluation of the supportive function of the partner, and different types of problem situations were examined. The results revealed a decrease in loneliness scores as a function of the positive evaluation of partner support. A buffer-effect for partner support was not found. However, the effect of the partner's support varied with the type of problems under investigation. It is concluded that in the event of externally caused problems, such as unemployment, the support provided by the partner is of some use, but nevertheless falls short in dealing with the problem. The support from other individuals in the network seems indispensable.*

The relationships that individuals maintain with others are of major importance for personal well-being and for the prevention of loneliness. The content and quality of the relationships, as perceived by the individuals involved, have thereby been shown to have greater significance than the size and the composition of the network of relationships, as objectively assessed (De Jong-Gierveld, 1984, in press; Kessler & McLeod, 1985).

When individuals are asked to whom they (would) turn for advice or help, the large majority of those living with a spouse name that person in response to the question. Respondents without a spouse generally identify a friend or a family member as their first confidant. A smaller number of respondents mention a neighbour or a colleague. Individuals

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who mention a confidant are, on average, happier and more satisfied than those who are unable to name a confidant (Fischer & Phillips, 1982). The *type* of the first confidant that is mentioned appears to be a relevant factor. This is in accordance with the ideas of Litwak and Szelenyi (1969), namely that different types of relationships serve different functions. The discussion of difficulties and problems is a task specifically performed with a partner or a friend. It is less usual to talk about these problems with neighbours or colleagues.

*Marriage* or the presence of the *spouse* in particular, is considered to have a protective effect on both the physical and mental well-being of men and women. As a consequence, married people are found to be less prone to loneliness, early mortality and to suicide than non-married people (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Gove, 1972; House, Robbins, & Metzner, 1982; Kobrin & Hendershot, 1977; Lynch, 1977; Veenhoven, 1983). In their analysis of the effects of marriage and several types of strain on depression, Kessler and Essex (1982) show that in all the subsamples analysed, the non-married are significantly more depressed than the married. Kessler and Essex conclude that "in all subsamples the decomposition shows that differential responsiveness to strain is a centrally important component of this overall difference in depression. Differential exposure [to strain], by comparison, is of only marginal importance" (p. 491). Kessler and Essex consider the differential responsiveness to strain to be related to differences in resources. These resources function to control the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that often accompany problems. *Intimacy*, or the *confiding, intimate relationship* in particular, proves to be such an important resource.

The Kessler and Essex study was part of a review (Kessler & McLeod, 1985) of normal population surveys concentrating on the effects of different support factors on mental health and well-being. The leading question in that review was: Is there evidence of stress buffering, or, is there an association between support and mental health independent of stress? If support and mental health are more strongly related under conditions of high stress than under conditions of low stress, a buffer effect is indicated. Eleven out of the twenty-seven studies in the review show such a buffer effect.

The previously mentioned articles inspired us to explore the buffer effect in a preliminary research project on the effects of support on loneliness. The study had two objectives. The first was to test the hypothesis that loneliness is inversely related to the support provided by the partner. In doing so, we aimed to gain insight into the protection that can be provided in the context of the family and the household. The second objective was to test the hypothesis that support and loneliness

are more strongly related in the subsample of people with problems than in the subsample of people without problems.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Considerations on the Position of the Spouse as the Provider of Protection**

Kessler and Essex (1982) consider married persons to be "high resource" persons. The idea of marriage as the principal cause of preservation embraces the assumption that it is the *spouse* who provides such intimacy. In our opinion however, this type of intimacy can, in principle, be procured in all types of partner-relationships. This includes non-marriage partner-relationships, in particular when these partners are members of the same household and their relationship is a permanent alternative to marriage. In fact, being unmarried, divorced or widowed does not exclude cohabitation with a partner. Thus, in the present study, the distinction is made between partner-relationships (marriage and non-marriage) and individuals without a partner-relationship.

The leading assumption in the present investigation is that a partner-relationship is beneficial for a person's well-being *if* this person experiences support from the partner. We consider the identification of the partner as the first confidant to be a *minimum* criterion for support. The function of the partner as first confidant is further differentiated according to the degree of intimacy (Levinger & Snoek, 1972) achieved in the relationship. *If* the relationship is identified as one with a high degree of intimacy, that is, where there is mutual disclosure of personal problems and deep secrets, the relationship contributes more to the person's well-being than in the case where the relationship is identified as a less intimate one (Burt, 1984). A measure of support that assesses whether or not the partner is considered a first confidant *as well as* the degree of intimacy in the partner-relationship, is more strongly related to loneliness than an indicator that only focuses on the presence or absence of a (marital) partner.

The ideas described previously suggest that the buffer effect hypothesis can be tested by examining the protective function of the partner among people who are not experiencing problems, and among people who are experiencing problems. There is the difficulty, however, that the "protective function of the partner" can be confounded with "experiencing problems, especially problems in personal relationships," when both variables are requested from the respondents (Eckenrode & Gore, 1981; Thoits, 1982). This difficulty can be dealt with by making the distinction between relationship problems and other types of experienced problems.

Even where other types of experienced problems are concerned, the possibility exists that support is confounded with the experienced

problems. It is conceivable that present problems have little negative impact because support given in the past has proved to be successful. To avoid confounding, the researchers (and not the respondents) can specify the social situations that are more likely to cause problems. However, if this procedure is adopted, individual differences concerning the experiencing of problems remain unspecified.

Our test of the buffer effect hypothesis involved both methods of problem identification.

## METHOD

### The Data Sets

Data from two Dutch Surveys were analysed.

The first study was performed in 1982. Interviews and an additional mail-survey among a sample of 450 unemployed and occupationally disabled men and women, and a control group of 258 employed individuals were conducted. The names and addresses of the subsamples were randomly selected from the national population, and were stratified according to employment status. The response rate was 51%. The central theme of this project was the interrelation between the degree of confidence and intimacy of achieved relationships and loneliness thereby comparing individuals who were unemployed or occupationally disabled to individuals who were employed.

The second study involved interviews with 412 adult men and women, conducted in 1985. The sample was stratified according to marital status. Equal numbers of married, never married, divorced and widowed men and women were selected at random from the population registers of Purmerend, a fast growing commuter city (population about 46,000) and Haarlemmermeer. The latter community embraces 16 villages, the largest of which has a population of about 4,500, while the smaller ones have populations of approximately 500. The response rate was 49%. As a result of the employed stratification criteria, a relatively large proportion of the respondents, 182 out of 412, were men and women without partners. This study was directed at the analysis of the effects on loneliness of the support provided by the network of relationships.

### Questionnaire

Common to the studies was a set of questions on the *composition of the network of primary relations*. The following categorisation of respondents was made: (a) people with a partner (marriage or non-marriage), and (b) people without a partner.

For the first category, people with a partner relationship, the degree of *intimacy* as realized in this relationship, was derived from the score

on an item with a five-point scale, which ranged from very intimate to not intimate. In the identification of a partner as *first confidant*, we focused on the names the respondents gave in answer to the questions: (a) Are there any people who are so important to you, that you can discuss your personal problems and secrets with them? And, (2) Who is the most important among these people? (Study 1). In Study 2 the question asked was: Suppose you have a problem; to whom would you turn to first to talk about that problem, to ask for advice or help? The partner was considered the first confidant only if he or she was mentioned in response to these questions.

Combining the answers on the previous questions, a simple indicator of partner support was constructed: (a) people with a partner-relationship that was rated as very intimate and a partner who was named as first confidant, (2) people with other kinds of partner-relationships, and (3) people without partners. This measure of support is more or less comparable to other general measures of partner support (including the presence of an intimate, the perception that others care for you), that have recently been used in a number of studies (for an overview, see Kessler & McLeod, 1985, p. 226). Nevertheless there are doubts about the quality of this measuring instrument; it does not meet the high standards proposed by House and Kahn (1985).

*Loneliness Measuring Instrument.* An 11-item loneliness scale (range 0 to 11) was used. This scale meets the strict criteria of a Rasch model. The Rasch model is designed for dichotomous variables, whereas the latent trait is assumed to be continuous. The four assumptions underlying the Rasch model are (a) unidimensionality, (2) local stochastic independence, (3) monotonicity, and (4) sufficiency of simple sum statistics. The Rasch model is superior to classical test tools because it is a form of fundamental measurement, meaning that the model assumptions can be tested and that the probability that a person will agree with a particular item is predicted by a simple latent trait model. With respect to the validity of the scale, previous studies have shown that construct validity is fairly well guaranteed by the Rasch tests. So far, hopeful results have also been obtained with respect to the nomothetic span (De Jong-Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985).

*Problem Situations.* In Study 2 the respondents were requested to fill in a list of problem indicators. The problem inventory that was used, consisted of seven items indicating problems involving the network of personal relationships, and ten items assessing other problems. For each of the two sets of items, a dichotomous categorisation indicating the absence or existence of problems was constructed. In Study 1 the membership of a particular research category was assumed to be an indicator of experienced problems. Thus, the problem

TABLE 1 Mean Loneliness Scores and the Relationships Between Loneliness and the Degree of Partner Support, for the Categories of Respondents in the Two Surveys

	(a) <i>Partner Is First Confidant and Intimate</i>		(b) <i>Partner is Not First Confidant and/or Not Intimate</i>		(c) <i>Without Partner</i>	
	Mean	n	Mean	n	Mean	n
Study 1	1.9	261	3.3	339	4.4	108
Study 2	2.1	137	2.9	93	4.0	182
<i>LSD test results:</i>						
	<i>(a versus b)</i>		<i>(b versus c)</i>		<i>(a versus c)</i>	
<i>Study 1: <math>F(2) = 31.8, p &lt; .001</math></i>	<i><math>p &lt; .001</math></i>		<i><math>p &lt; .001</math></i>		<i><math>p &lt; .001</math></i>	
<i>Study 2: <math>F(2) = 19.0, p &lt; .001</math></i>	<i><math>p &lt; .05</math></i>		<i><math>p &lt; .01</math></i>		<i><math>p &lt; .001</math></i>	

identification process was not respondent-oriented, but researcher-oriented. Being unemployed or occupationally disabled was considered to constitute a problem situation, whereas being employed was considered a non-problem situation.

## RESULTS

### The Partner-Relationships; Protective Characteristics

The data that document the relationship between the partner-relationship and the support provided by the partner for all the respondents of Study 1 and 2 respectively, are presented first. The results for both data sets are provided in Table 1. A considerable number of people do not consider their partner to be the first confidant *and* an intimate.

The figures reflect the importance of the evaluation of the supportive function of the partner for loneliness. People who consider their partner to be the first confidant *and* an intimate have significantly lower loneliness scores than people with other kinds of partner-relationships. The differences in loneliness scores between the latter category and the people without a partner are significant as well. In accordance with the first hypothesis, the respondents' evaluations of the supportive function of the partner are found to be significantly correlated with loneliness ( $r = -.29, p < .001$  and  $r = -.29, p < .001$ , respectively).

### Supportive Partner Relationships in Problem and Non-Problem Situations

For Study 1 the correlation between the evaluation of the supportive function of the partner and loneliness, in the non-problem group of employed respondents is  $-.30$  ( $p < .001$ ). The correlation between partner support and loneliness for the disabled respondents is  $-.27$  ( $p < .001$ ) and for the unemployed  $-.19$  ( $p < .01$ ). The last two coefficients do not differ significantly from the correlation coefficient of the employed respondents (Fisher's  $z$ -test:  $p > .05$ ).

In Study 2 the correlation between the evaluation of the supportive function of the partner and loneliness, for the non-problem group is  $-.35$  ( $p < .001$ ). The correlation between partner support and loneliness for the respondents experiencing relationship problems is  $-.35$  ( $p < .001$ ). This figure does not differ from the correlation coefficient in the non-problem group (Fisher's  $z$ -test:  $p > .05$ ). However, the correlation between partner support and loneliness, for the group experiencing other problems,  $r = -.13$ , is weak (n.s.) and significantly lower than the correlation coefficient in the non-problem group (Fisher's  $z$ -test,  $p < .05$ ).

In other words, the results do not reveal a buffer effect. The impact of support on loneliness is not stronger, and in one case even lower, in the subsamples of people with problems than in the subsamples of people without problems.

### DISCUSSION

The present study assumed that supportive relationships decrease the likelihood of experiencing loneliness. The respondents' evaluations of the support provided by their partners were found to be negatively related to loneliness. This finding is in accordance with the first hypothesis. Respondents who positively evaluate their partner's support are less likely to report loneliness. The supportive *quality* of the partner-relationship as well as the availability of a partner, contribute to the alleviation of loneliness.

The test of the buffer hypothesis revealed that partner support and loneliness are *not* more strongly related in the subsamples of people with problems than in the subsamples of people without problems. The findings corroborated the significance of *partner support*, both in problem and in non-problem situations (Cassel, 1976). However, in non-relationship problem situations, the correlation between partner support and loneliness was weak.

In attempting to explain this unexpected finding on the effects of partner support on loneliness, and the absence of a buffer effect in general, we feel it is useful (1) to review partner support as it is



measured in this study, (2) to review partner support as part of a broader concept of "social support," and (3) to pay attention to the different problem situations under investigation.

The design of a survey may be not appropriate to test the buffer effect for partner support. House (1981) suggests that main effects of support may be found when stressors have occurred several months prior to the measurement of psychological symptoms. Adjustments to those stressors may have already been completed, so support may simply appear to have a main effect and no buffer effect.

In the two studies, an indicator of partner support was constructed, which was based on questions concerning the partner as the first confidant and the partner as an intimate. This measuring instrument focuses on the dimension of intimate interaction. As a consequence, other important facets of the social support concept, such as helping transactions are omitted. Rook (1985) suggests that buffer effects only appear when support is operationalized in ways that tend to capture helping rather than companionship. In our research group such a support scale is currently being prepared (Van Tilburg, 1987).

Relationships are defined as socially supporting if they provide intimacy, care and reflection (emotional support), and instrumental support. The extent to which the partner can provide these forms of support is often over-emphasized. It appears rather that non-partner and non-family relationships, embracing a broader range of types of support, are needed in addition to partner-relationships to cope with life-events and other serious problems (Dono et al., 1979; Granovetter, 1973; Hammer, 1983; Thoits, 1982; Van Tilburg, 1985). In the event of externally caused problems (such as unemployment), the support provided by the partner can be of some use, but nevertheless falls short in dealing with the problem situation. In these circumstances the support from other individuals in the network seems indispensable (cf. Walker, MacBride & Vachon, 1977).

Further research on the social support that can be provided by the network of close relationships, in addition to the emotional support provided by the partner, is urgently required. Future research efforts should also focus on the effects of social support in situations differing according to the type and the gravity of the experienced problems.

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